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AUTHOR Wirtz, Philip W.; And Others
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ABSTRACT

A study of the reasons cited by 508 high school students for deciding to work part-time indicated that working to acquire additional spending money is only one of many reasons why high school students elect to work. Reasons for working were found to be significantly associated with a variety of situational and social factors. Academic program and grade were significantly related to working in order to save for future education versus gaining workplace skills and experience. Saving for future education was often a major factor in the decision to work. Boys placed more importance on working because their parents wanted them to, whereas girls emphasized working for the purpose of learning skills, gaining experience, and saving for future education. Teacher approval was significantly associated with gaining skills and experience, and peers were found to be supportive of youths working to help support their families, learn skills, and save for future education. This study thus found little evidence in support of recent suggestions in the literature that high school students who are employed part-time believe that there is little to be learned from their jobs and that their main reason for working is to gain spending money. (Seven tables/graphs are provided, as well as 45 references.) (MN)

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Situational and Social Influences On High School Students' Decisions To Work Part-Time

Philip W. Wirtz

Cynthia A. Rohrbeck

George Washington University

Ivan Charner

Bryna Shore Fraser

National Institute for Work and Learning

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Abstract

Despite recent suggestions in the literature high school students who are employed part-time believe that there is little to be learned from their jobs, and work primarily to gain spending money, empirical evidence regarding the reasons that youths decide to work and how the people in teenagers' lives influence this decision is sparse. Based on the responses of 508 employed high school students, this study investigated the situational and social factors influencing high school students' decision to work part-time. Results of this study showed that working to acquire additional spending cash was only one of a number of reasons identified, and that saving for future education was often a major factor in teenagers' decision to work. Reasons for working were found to be significantly associated with a variety of situational and social factors. Academic program and grade were significantly related to working in order to save for future education vs. gaining workplace skills and experience. Boys placed more importance on working because their parents wanted them to while girls emphasized working in order to learn skills, gain experience, and save for future education. Teacher approval was significantly associated with working in order to gain skills and experience, and peers were found to be supportive of youths working to help support their families, learn skills, and save for future education. These results underscore the importance of situational and social influences in understanding high school students' decisions to work part-time.

Situational and Social Influences on High School Students'

Decisions to Work Part-Time

Although recent research has begun to unfold the processes underlying development of work values by adolescents (Gribbons & Lohnes, 1965; Hales & Fenner, 1972; Lindsay & Knox, 1984; Miller & Simon, 1979; Paine, Deutsch, & Smith, 1967; Perrone, 1965; Steinberg, Greenberger, Vaux, & Ruggiero, 1981; Thomas, 1974; Thomas & Shields, 1987), very little is known about the actual bases on which youths decide to work part-time during high school. That large numbers of adolescents do choose to work is unquestionable: More than 2.4 million high school students are employed part-time during the school year, and nearly one-third of all 9th- and 10th-graders (and approximately 3 out of every 4 high school seniors) hold part-time jobs, often earning more than $200 a month (Bachman, 1982, 1987; Barton & Fraser, 1978; Charner & Fraser, 1987; Cole, 1981; Greenberger & Steinberg, 1986; Greenberger, Steinberg, Vaux, & McAuliffe, 1980; Steinberg, 1982; Steinberg & Greenberger, 1980; Westcott, 1976; Young, 1985). Surprisingly, despite the sheer magnitude of the number of youths who work while in high school, the reasons youths decide to work has remained largely unexplored.

One reason for the relative lack of attention to youths' motives in choosing to work part-time during high school lies in the common assumption that the work decision is based primarily on the need to acquire additional spending money. This assertion is partially supported by studies which show that teenagers have become progressively more interested in the acquisition of material goods (Greenberger & Steinberg, 1986; Yovovich, 1982), and that a great deal of youths' earnings from employment are spent on personal needs and activities rather than factors such as family support (Johnson, Bachman, & O'Malley, 1982; Manning, 1980). Combined with surveys of employed youths which show the importance for holding a job of having spending money "for other things" (Greater Portland Work-Education Council, 1981; Charner & Fraser, 1984, 1987), these results have led some to conclude that adolescent employment is largely discretional and questionable in value (Greenberger & Steinberg, 1986). Frequently omitted from these discussions, however, is the fact that these same youth surveys reflect considerable individual variation in youths' reasons for working part-time during high school -- variation which has not previously been systematically explored. It is clear that adolescents do work for a number

of reasons beyond having additional spending cash, although no research to date has explored the situational and social factors which relate to the different motives for working.

A clearer understanding of the reasons high school students choose to work is crucial to the current debate regarding the value of combining employment with formal education during the high school years. Recent criticism of this combination has taken exception to the claim by proponents (e.g., Panel on Youth, 1974) that work settings provide the opportunity for developing and exercising personal responsibility, taking responsibility for the welfare of others, and establishing more extensive instrumental and social relations with nonfamilial adults (Greenberger & Steinberg, 1981). However, this argument fails to acknowledge the possibility that, for some youths, employment may represent an investment in the future -- in the development of useful skills, in the acquisition of work experience, and in saving for future education -- and for others may reflect situational constraints on income to meet basic needs. Indeed, "saving for future education" was found to be nearly as important in one nationwide study of employed students as "having money for other things" (Charner & Fraser, 1984); yet, this future-oriented reason for working has seldom figured in critics' assessments of the value of working part-time while in high school. A clearer picture of the functions served by youth employment -- and the subpopulations most (and least) served by these functions -- would seem essential to any assessment of the value of combining formal education with part-time employment during the high school years.

To the extent that youths work for reasons beyond the increased affluence associated with additional income, several different types of factors would be expected to influence the decision to work part-time while in high school. Sociodemographic factors (notably minority status and socioeconomic level) would be expected to affect the extent to which youths work to provide immediate support for self and family. Situational factors (such as high school program and grade) would be expected to reflect the extent to which adolescent employment represents an investment in the future (i.e., to save for future education or to work in order to gain skills and work experience). And differential socialization patterns suggest that boys would be more likely than girls to be working for support-related reasons, while girls would be more likely to work for learning-related reasons.

It is also reasonable to hypothesize that social influences may impact on adolescents' reasons for working, in view of the fact that youths have been reported to be unusually sensitive to evaluation by others (J.C. Coleman, 1974). Although the salience of potentially influential sources changes with age and grade level (Floyd & South, 1972), parents, peers, and teachers have consistently been found to exert the most salient influence on adolescents (Brittain, 1963; J.S. Coleman, 1961; Douvan & Adelson, 1966; Friesen, 1968; Galbo, 1984; Meissner, 1965; Musgrove, 1966; Smith & Klein, 1966), with teachers exerting less influence than parents and peers (Aschenbrenner, 1972; Cervantes, 1969; Coleman, 1961; Galbo, 1984; Rosenberg, 1976).

The current research focused on (a) identifying the primary reasons that high school students choose to work part-time, (b) how these reasons vary as a function of sociodemographic, situational, and social factors, and on (c) assessing the extent to which parents, peers, and teachers influence the decision to work. Because prior research has demonstrated a considerable diversity in high school students' jobs, the current effort concentrated on one particular industry -- the fast food industry -- in which adolescents frequently hold part-time jobs while in high school. Nearly 3.5 million people work in fast-food outlets, most of whom (approximately three-fourths) are between the ages of 16 and 20 (Bureau of National Affairs, 1985). It has recently been estimated that fast food restaurants employ 17% of all employed adolescents (Lewin-Epstein, 1981).

Method

Subjects

As part of a large nationwide study of hourly employees in fast-food occupations (Charner & Fraser, 1984), 508 high school juniors and seniors randomly selected from the population of high school juniors and seniors employed by seven major fast food chains (and for whom complete data on key analysis variables were available) were selected for the present analysis. In the larger study (from which these subjects were drawn), a random sample of hourly employees on the May or June 1982 payrolls of 279 fast food restaurants from the seven companies was conducted; 59% of the sample was between 14 and 18 years old. Three waves of mail-outs conducted during the fall of 1982 and the winter of 1983 generated returned questionnaires from 4,660 respondents (66% response rate). A structured

questionnaire assessed demographic characteristics, family background, educational attainment and plans, attitudes about work in general and the fast food job in particular, facts and perceived effects regarding the current job, and future plans. Respondents were guaranteed confidentiality and received $5 in exchange for a completed questionnaire.

As reflected in Figure 1, 38% of the 508 subjects in this study were male and 62% were female. Eighty-five percent of the sample were white, and 10% were black. The majority (74%) were in their senior year of high school, and described their high school program as academic (52%), general (28%), or vocational/other (20%). Seventy eight percent of this sample were living with both a male and female parent/guardian; 47% of the fathers of this sample of high school juniors and seniors had at least some college experience.

Measures

Dependent measures: Reasons for being employed. Based on earlier studies of adolescents (Greater Portland Work-Education Council, 1981; Greenberger & Steinberg, 1986), subjects were asked to rate, on a 3-point Likert scale ranging from "not important" to "very important", how important each of the following eight reasons was for having their fast food job: (1) "help support my family"; (2) "support myself; (3) "have money for other things"; (4) "experience of working"; (5) "parents want me to work"; (6) "friends work here"; (7) "learn skills"; (8) "save for future education". These eight reasons for working formed the dependent measures in this study.

Independent measures: Social influence. Each subject was asked to rate, on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from "disapprove" to "approve", "How do you think the following people feel about your working on your fast food job": (1) mother, (2) father, (3) teachers, and (4) "most of your friends". Mother's and father's perceived approval were averaged into a single index of perceived parental approval (22% of the sample were living with only one parent).

Sociodemographic and situational factors. Situational differences were assessed through measures of grade in school (11th or 12th), school program (academic, general, vocational/other), average level of parental educational attainment (based on a 7-point scale), age, and race (White, Black, other). Sex of respondent was also included in the current analysis as a reflection of possible socialization pattern

differences.

Procedure

In order to determine the overall importance of the eight reasons for working considered in this analysis, the mean importance of each was computed and the variables were ranked based on these means. Subsequently, two-tailed single sample t-tests on the parental, teacher, and peer approval variables were conducted to provide an indication of the extent to which each of these three groups were perceived by the adolescents in this sample to approve of their working. Bivariate relationships between the set of eight dependent measures and the social influence variables and situational measures measures were assessed with a series of one-way multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) procedures (i.e., separately for each independent measure). Finally, an MANOVA was conducted in which the set of eight dependent measures were regressed on the social influence and situational variables simultaneously; because of the significance of the multivariate F, the relationship between each of the eight dependent variables and the set of independent variables was inspected separately.

Results

Descriptive statistics for the key variables considered in this analysis are presented graphically in Table 1 as well as graphically in Figure 2. Having money "for other things" averaged highest in importance of the eight reasons for working, followed in importance by the experience of working, self-support, saving for future education, and learning skills. Working because parents wanted it, because friends worked at the same place, or in order to support the family were rated as comparatively unimportant among this sample. Although all three influence groups (parents, peers, and teachers) were perceived on average to approve of the employment of this sample of adolescents, parental approval was significantly higher than approval of friends ($M_{diff}=0.16$, $t(506)=3.84$, $p<.0001$) or teachers ($M_{diff}=0.53$, $t(506)=11.25$, $p<.0001$).

The bivariate relationships between reasons for working, situational variables, and social influence factors are presented in Table 2 and graphically in Figures 3 and 4. It is obvious from this table that non-White students, students from families with lower parental education, and students participating in a vocational program in high school tended to place more importance on supporting their family, on

supporting themselves, and on working in order to learn skills. Black students were also found to attach more importance to working because parents wanted them to, but placed less importance on working because friends worked at the same place. Unsurprisingly, students participating in an academic program placed higher importance on working to save for future education, and older students attached significantly more importance to working in order to support their families. Females in this sample placed greater importance on working to gain experience, to learn skills, and to save for future education, while males placed more importance on working because parents wanted them to. Students who felt higher levels of parental, teacher, and peer approval placed greater importance on working for the experience and skills gained; high parental approval was also associated with working because parents wanted it, and high peer approval was associated as well with working in order to support the family and to save for future education.

Since Table 2 reflects only bivariate relationships, it becomes important to assess the independent impact of each of the situational and social influence factors on the eight reasons for working. The results of regressing the reasons for working on entire set of independent variables simultaneously are presented in Table 3. This table provides convincing evidence that the sex-based differences in reasons for working identified in the bivariate analysis are not artifacts of differences in other sociodemographic characteristics such as parental education, age, race, grade, or high school program. Even after controlling for these other factors, males were found to place greater importance on working because their parents wanted it, while females were placed more importance on working in order to learn skills, to gain experience, and to save for future education.

Table 3 also reflects the independent effects of parents, teachers, and peers on reasons for working. Unsurprisingly, once sociodemographic factors such as parental education and race were controlled, parents were found to exert influence only on "working because parents want it" as a reason for working. Of the three sources of influence (parents, teachers, peers) considered here, only teachers were found to convey the importance of working to gain experience; students who reported high teacher approval of their employment tended to rate working "to gain experience" as an important reason for working. Peers conveyed the importance of working to support the family, to learn skills, and to save for

future education.

Several additional relationships presented in Table 3 which may or may not represent the impact of social influence factors should also be noted. Unsurprisingly, saving for future education was rated as significantly more important by 12th-graders, by academic-program students, and by those from families with higher parental education. In contrast, vocational program students, 11th-graders, and students from families with lower parental education attached significantly greater importance to working in order to contribute to family and personal support. Additionally, even after controlling for other sociodemographic characteristics (including parental education and high school program), racial differences are also apparent in the reasons for working, with minority students attaching significantly more importance to working in order to support their family and to learn skills compared to Whites. Blacks were also found to place comparatively little importance on working because friends worked in the same place.

Discussion

These results bring into question the ubiquity of previous assertions that teenagers work in jobs low in intrinsic rewards, and primarily for monetary benefits (Greenberger & Steinberg, 1980); indeed, the current study suggests that the skills and work experience gained, as well as savings going toward future education, represent important reasons for working for many adolescents. If, as Steinberg, Greenberger, Vaux, & Ruggiero (1981) assert,

> "Adolescent workers, for the most part, do not believe that there is much to be learned from the sorts of jobs they are employed in and most certainly do not believe that their experience in these part-time jobs has any long-term significance" (pp. 418-419),

it is not clear why they would attach importance to factors such as gaining skills and work experience in describing their reasons for working. Like others, we found that the greatest importance was attached to working to have money "for other things". However, the results presented here also suggest a far wider diversity in the reasons youths choose to work than has previously been acknowledged. It is enticingly simple to conclude that youths work in order to have more money to purchase discretional items; the

current findings concerning situational differences, in particular, suggest the deceptiveness of such a simplistic view.

The results of the current study suggest not only that teenagers work for reasons well beyond merely having spending cash, but also that the reasons for working vary widely as a result of situational and social factors. Boys in this sample were found to place more importance on working because their parents wanted them to, while girls emphasized working in order to learn skills, to gain experience, and to save for future education. Teenagers in an academic program (primarily those in the 12th grade) were more likely to report working in order to save for future education, while those in a vocational program reflected the importance of skill acquisition. And minority students (as well as those from families with lower parental education) reported the importance of working to help support their family.

It would also appear from the results of this study that others in the teenager's environment play an important, and unexpected, role in defining the reasons for working. The finding that youths perceive significantly greater approval of their employment by teachers when their objectives in working are to learn skills and gain experience suggests, in contrast to consistent previous reports of lack of teacher influence on youth attitudes and values, one important area in which teachers <u>are</u> perceived to have a significant impact. It was on working "for the experience of working" -- the second most important reason cited among this sample of employed high school students -- that teachers were found to exert the most influence: Clearly, teachers represent an important source of information for adolescents when evaluating the benefits accruing to work while in high school. The influence of friends, too, appears to be quite constructive: peers were <u>not</u> found to be supportive of working in order to have money "for other things" or "because friends work here", but rather were perceived to offer significantly more approval when the objective of working was to bring additional income into the family, to learn skills, and to save for future education. Taken together, these findings suggest much more positive influences of others in the teenager's environment than has previously been reported.

It is interesting, in view of the changing socialization patterns de-emphasizing women's assumption of traditional roles rather than work roles, that the importance of working to the girls in this sample of adolescents was more on the experiential, educational, and skill development reasons for working, while

high school boys were more likely to work because their parents want them to. One possible interpretation of this finding is that girls perceive their mothers' workplace roles primarily as matters of choice rather than economic necessity: It would be intriguing to conduct a study of high school girls ten years hence to see how contemporary changes in socialization and economic patterns have affected this difference.

Several caveats need to be offered concerning the interpretation of these results. First, it should be noted that all measures employed in this analysis were based on self-report data of high school juniors and seniors employed in fast food jobs; the degree of accuracy of these measures and the extent to which these results extend to adolescents in other industries or to a broader population are questions worthy of further pursuit. A second concern is the issue of causality: while the current cross-sectional study suggests the plausibility of a model specifying situational and social influences on the reasons adolescents choose to work, there exist the (albeit less convincing) alternative hypotheses that (a) individuals select their own reasons for working first, and it is based on these reasons that parents, teachers, and peers form their own approval regarding the work, or (b) there exists some antecedent factor (perhaps a personality characteristic) that causes both the selection of a set of reasons for working by the adolescent and the approval of the adolescent's working by parents, teachers, and peers. In the absence of a longitudinal study (with appropriate measures), the comparative tenability of these alternative models cannot be directly assessed.

These caveats notwithstanding, the results of this study underscore the importance of considering situational and social factors in understanding the reasons that adolescents choose to work. The thesis that teenage workers do not believe that there is much to be learned from the sorts of jobs they are employed in appears to be far too simplistic to be of much value. Equally important, although adolescence is unquestionably a period when many youths test the limits of their own independence, there are clearly areas in which the influence of teachers, peers, and parents play a significant role in the choices which are made; decisions regarding working during the high school years appear to fall into this category. While the jobs that teenagers hold may not be the most glamourous positions available in our society, it is clear that adolescents who hold these jobs do so in large part for the experiential and educational reasons -- and with the guidance, influence and support of teachers, parents, and friends.

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Author Notes

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Correspondence concerning this article should be sent to Philip W. Wirtz, Department of Management Science, George Washington University, 2115 G St., N.W., #203, Washington, DC 20052

Table 1

Descriptive Statistics

	Mean	Std. Dev.	Std. Error	Min.	Max.	t
Importance to holding job						
Money for other things	2.81	0.43	0.02	1	3	
Experience of working	2.49	0.62	0.03	1	3	
Support self	2.45	0.68	0.03	1	3	
Save for future education	2.33	0.78	0.03	1	3	
Learn skills	2.23	0.72	0.03	1	3	
Parents want me to work	1.85	0.70	0.03	1	3	
Friends work here	1.53	0.69	0.03	1	3	
Support family	1.40	0.65	0.03	1	3	
Sociodemographic characteristics						
Age	16.85	0.62	0.03	16	19	
Grade	2.74	0.44	0.02	11	12	
Parental Education	3.68	1.34	0.06	1	7	
Sex (1=male,2=female)	1.62	0.49	0.02	1	2	
Parental approval	1.32	0.90	0.04	-2	+2	33.02[a]
Friends' approval	1.15	1.01	0.04	-2	+2	25.60[a]
Teachers' approval	0.79	1.20	0.05	-2	+2	14.76[a]

[a]Two-tail $p(507) < .0001$.

Table 2

Mean Importance Values of Reasons for Working

by Social and Situational Variables

	n	Other Things M	Future Educ. M	Work Exper M	Learn Skills M	Supp. Self M	Supp. Family M	Parents M	Peers M
Race									
White	429	2.83	2.31	2.47	2.19	2.41	1.32	1.81	1.56
Black	45	2.76	2.40	2.62	2.44	2.71	1.73	2.07	1.15
Other	34	2.67	2.47	2.56	2.50	2.62	1.94	1.97	1.68
F		2.58	0.86	1.49	5.19[b]	5.09[b]	22.40[c]	3.33[a]	8.23[c]
Program									
Academic	259	2.82	2.50	2.51	2.19	2.36	1.32	1.82	1.56
General	142	2.80	2.09	2.39	2.19	2.46	1.35	1.87	1.49
Vocational	107	2.82	2.22	2.58	2.39	2.66	1.66	1.88	1.50
F		0.20	14.48[c]	3.17[a]	3.43[a]	7.69[c]	11.62[c]	0.37	1.08
Age									
16	137	2.77	2.31	2.45	2.20	2.40	1.35	1.82	1.51
17	610	2.84	2.33	2.51	2.22	2.45	1.38	1.85	1.53
18, 19[d]	61	2.79	2.34	2.44	2.34	2.59	1.61	1.85	1.62
F		1.25	0.04	0.64	0.88	1.63	3.63[a]	0.14	0.60
Grade									
11	131	2.79	2.23	2.50	2.21	2.45	1.33	1.79	1.50
12	377	2.82	2.36	2.49	2.24	2.45	1.42	1.86	1.55
F		0.43	2.86	0.03	0.09	0.00	2.12	1.22	0.58

Table 2 (continued)

	n	Other Things M	Future Educ. M	Work Exper M	Learn Skills M	Supp. Self M	Supp. Family M	Parents M	Peers M
Parental Education[e]									
Low	220	2.83	2.39	2.54	2.34	2.55	1.57	1.80	1.56
High	288	2.81	2.28	2.45	2.15	2.38	1.27	1.88	1.51
F		0.32	2.10	2.82	9.19[b]	8.26[b]	28.81[c]	1.26	0.66
Sex									
Male	194	2.80	2.22	2.37	2.07	2.47	1.38	1.99	1.59
Female	314	2.82	2.40	2.56	2.33	2.44	1.41	1.75	1.50
F		0.20	6.49[a]	12.47[c]	15.38[c]	0.37	0.40	13.83[c]	2.20
Parental Approval[e]									
Low	242	2.83	2.28	2.38	2.08	2.44	1.39	1.72	1.51
High	266	2.80	2.37	2.59	2.36	2.46	1.41	1.96	1.55
F		0.62	1.71	14.40[c]	19.92[c]	0.16	0.05	15.25[c]	0.52
Teacher Approval[e]									
Low	188	2.84	2.25	2.33	2.05	2.42	1.34	1.77	1.53
High	320	2.80	2.38	2.58	2.34	2.47	1.44	1.89	1.54
F		0.66	3.02	20.22[c]	19.68[c]	0.53	2.93	3.28	0.01
Peer Approval[e]									
Low	267	2.82	2.23	2.37	2.06	2.40	1.32	1.81	1.54
High	241	2.81	2.44	2.61	2.41	2.51	1.49	1.88	1.54
F		0.09	8.65[b]	19.60[c]	31.58[c]	3.49	8.05[b]	1.16	0.00

[a]$p < .05$ [b]$p < .01$ [c]$p < .001$

[d]Includes 2 19-year-olds grouped with 59 18-year-olds.

[e]For presentational clarify, parental education, parental approval, teacher approval, and peer approval have all been dichotomized at the median in this table.

Table 3

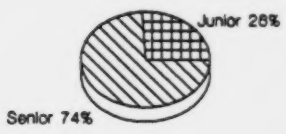
Regression of Reasons for Working on Social and Situational Variables

	d.f	Supp. Family F	Supp. Self F	Other Things F	Work Exper F	Parents F	Peers F	Learn Skills F	Future Educ. F
Race	2	17.13[c]	2.66	2.95	0.92	3.14	9.32[c]	3.89[a]	1.08
Program	2	5.19[b]	3.19[a]	0.21	3.05[a]	0.26	0.91	1.55	17.00[c]
Age	1	2.66	3.35	0.11	0.34	0.03	0.00	1.89	1.07
Grade	1	0.39	0.47	0.18	0.09	1.56	0.83	0.05	4.29[a]
Parental Education	1	20.62[c]	8.47[b]	0.34	0.87	1.71	0.21	3.33	4.66[a]
Sex	1	0.56	0.37	0.04	12.12[c]	11.02[b]	4.14[a]	16.14[c]	3.98[a]
Parental Approval	1	0.20	0.00	0.80	0.17	8.44[b]	0.09	2.46	1.22
Teacher Approval	1	2.16	1.73	0.34	8.69[b]	0.68	1.53	2.30	0.11
Peer Approval	1	5.27[a]	7.54	0.07	1.83	0.55	3.67	7.68[b]	5.92[a]

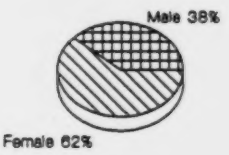
[a]$p < .05$ [b]$p < .01$ [c]$p < .001$

Demographic Characteristics

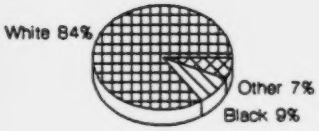
Year In School



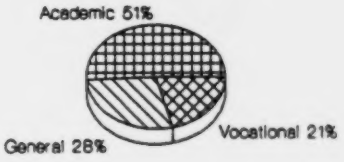
Sex



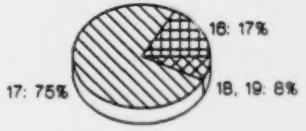
Race



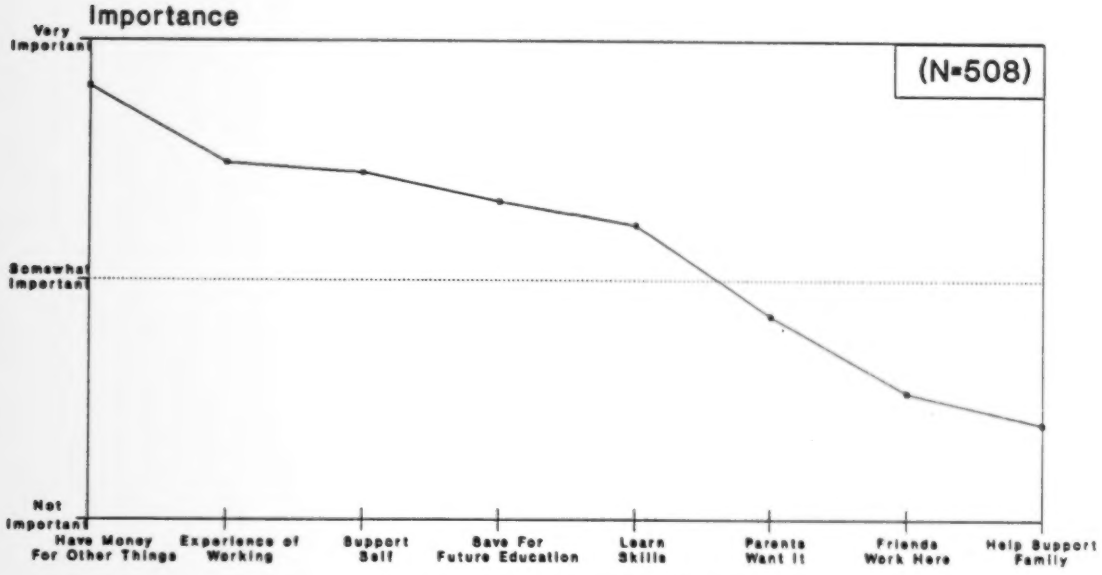
High School Program



Age

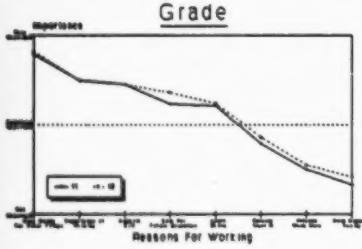


Importance of Working
To H.S. Students Working Part-Time

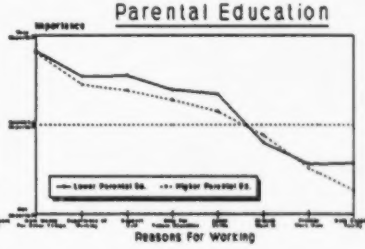


Importance of Working

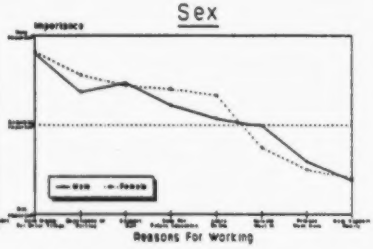
Grade



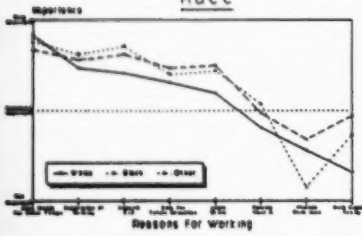
Parental Education



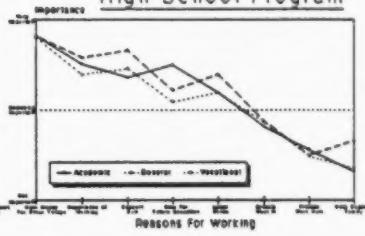
Sex



Race



High School Program



Age

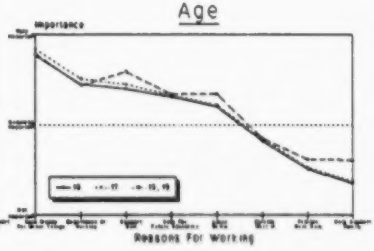
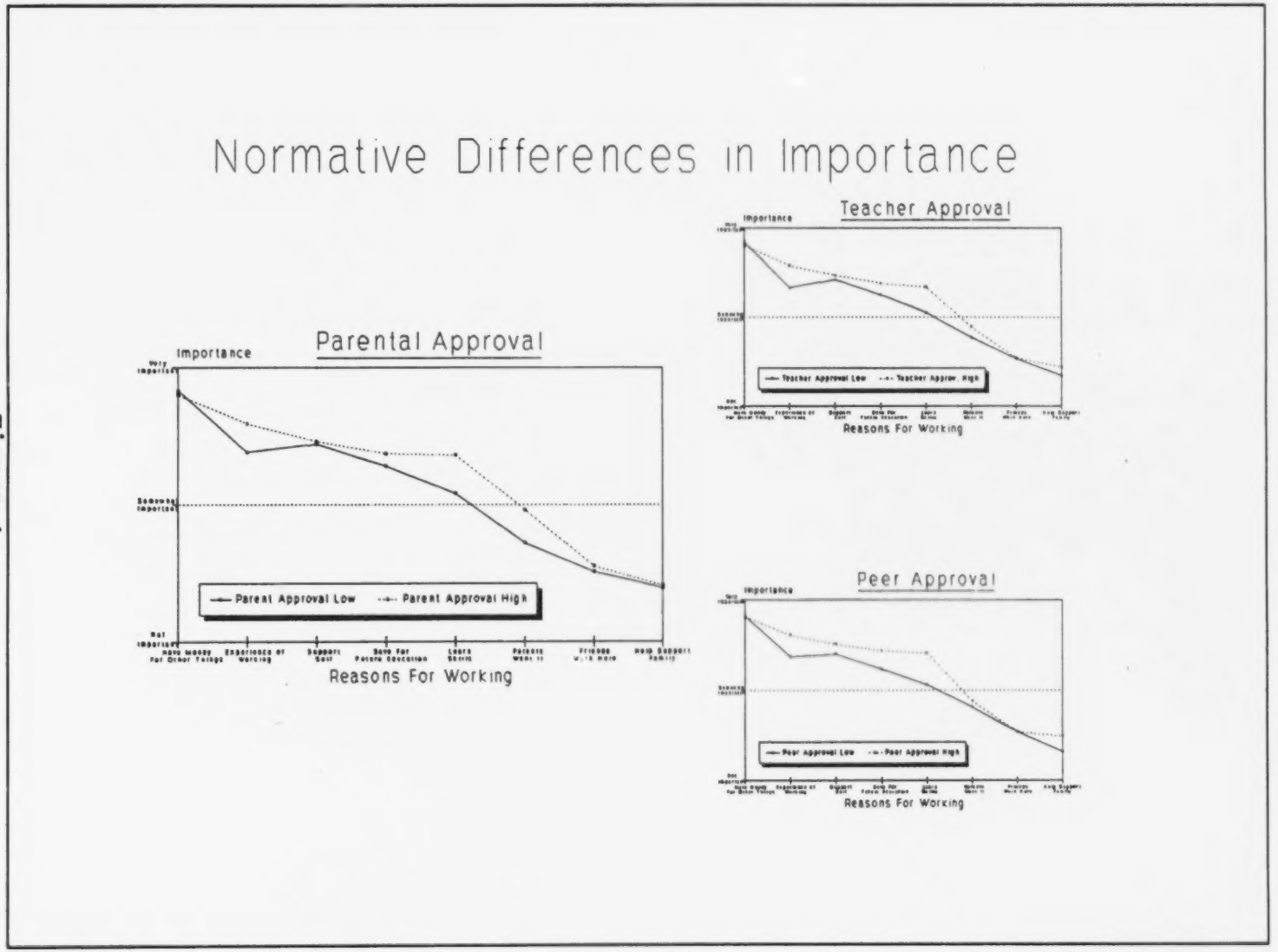


Figure 4


Normative Differences in Importance
Parental Approval
Importance
Parent Approval Low
Parent Approval High
Reasons For Working
Teacher Approval
Importance
Teacher Approval Low
Teacher Approv. High
Reasons For Working
Peer Approval
Importance
Peer Approval Low
Peer Approval High
Reasons For Working